DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS SECTION

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10th ANNIVERSARY OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 25 January 1990, the speakers were Ms. Elisabeth Evatt, Chairperson, United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and Ms. Chafika Sellami-Meslem, Director, Division for the Advancement of Women, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations, Vienna.

Ms. Evatt noted that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) commemorated its 10th Anniversary in December, 1989. It came into operation in September 1981, and has been ratified by 101 countries. She said CEDAW is a very important part of the human rights instruments of the United Nations, dealing not only with civil and political rights, but also with economic, social and cultural rights. The legal obligations of the Convention are threefold: (1) Removal of discriminatory laws and obstacles to equality; (2) promotion of equality by affirmative action; (3) Elimination of attitudes, conduct, prejudices and practices which are based on the inferiority or superiority of either sex.

According to Ms. Evatt, most states move fairly quickly to implement the first obligation of the Convention, while the second requirement has only been approached by some states. Yet, Ms. Evatt said, the most difficult obligation to meet is the one requiring elimination of discriminatory attitudes, conduct, prejudices and practice. In her view, it is hard to change attitudes toward women until they excercise political power and are economically independent.

Virtually every important aspect of the women's movement is covered in the Convention's 16 articles, Ms. Evatt said: health, education, employment, equal rights in the legal system and the social security system, prevention of exploitation and prostitution and equality in the family. A state which has ratified the Convention is required to report to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women within one year. As of today, 60 of the 101 countries accepting the Convention have presented their initial report. After the first report, the states must report at four yearly intervals.

The CEDAW Committee consists of 23 members (half of the Committee is elected every two years) who meet every year for two weeks. The members are not representatives of their government, but "independent experts of high moral standing". So far, the Committee has had only one male member. Addressing ways to improve the operation of CEDAW, Ms. Evatt said an additional provison for individual complaints might strengthen the Convention. During the question and answer period, Ms. Evatt said the Convention lacks measures to control its implementation, and that NGOs are not formally recognized in the Convention's statutes.

Ms. Sellami-Meslem said her presentation would cover three main points:

1. The work of the Division of the Advancement of Women (DAW) linked with the work of the Commission on the Status of Women

In relation to the Special Session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1987, the Division of the Advancement of Women adopted the "Long Work-Programme". Among the priority themes created under this Programme, Ms. Sellami-Meslem presented the 1988, 1989 and 1990 themes:

Equality:	"The National Machinery for Monitoring and Improving the Status of Women";
Development:	"The Problems of Rural Women -- Food and Water Resources";
Peace:	"Women's Access to Peace Information and Education" and "Efforts to Eradicate Violence Against Women".

In 1989 the priority themes were:

Equality:	"Equality in Economic and Social Participation";
Development:	"Women and Education - Eradication of Illiteracy";
Peace:	"Full Participation of Women in the Construction of their Countries".

In 1990, the three themes are:

Equality:	"Unequality in Political Participation and Decision-making";
Development:	"Negative Effects of the International Economic Situation";
Peace:	"Women in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict".

In connection with these priority themes, seminars or expert group meetings are organized by the Division of the Advancement of Women. Ms. Sellami-Meslem said women from national administrations as well as from the grass-root level participate at these meetings. The recommmendations made at the meetings are brought to the Commission of the Status of Women, and, so far, all recommendations have been endorsed by the Commission. As an example, among the concrete results of the follow-up between the DAW and the Commission, Ms. Sellami-Meslem emphasized that, after the adoption by the Commission of those recommendations, several countries are now revising their legislation or introducing new laws in order to protect women against violence in the family.

2. How the implementation of the CEDAW is linked with the "Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies" and how the NGOs may help in this process

Ms. Sellami-Meslem said she hopes the close links between the implementation of CEDAW and the "Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies" will be maintained. She stressed that the CEDAW is a specific human rights instrument which does not cover for instance individual allegations about discrimination against women. Despite a resolution adopted in 1987, the Commission on the Status of Women has no authority to follow up any of the presented allegations. The five members of the Commission, who are from different regions, examine each allegation and communicate their recommendation to the concerned country through the Division of the Advancement of Women. It is up to the country whether it will respond to the recommendation.

In Ms. Sellami-Meslem's view, it is important to keep political discrimination and discrimination against women as two separate human rights issues, meaning that, if a woman is arrested for political reasons, it is a case which should be handled under the Convention on Human Rights, and not be brought to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women. But, if a communication concerns a woman who is raped, it is an act of discrimination per se, and should be considered as a communication concening the status of women following the relevant procedures of the United Nations.

3. The agenda of the next extended session of the CEDAW Commission

The agenda will deal with the first review and appraisal of the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies" (United Nations document ECN/6/1990/1). A questionnaire was sent to all 159 members of the United Nations one and a half years ago, but the responses were few, Ms. Sellami-Meslem said. In order to compensate for the lack of information, the Division for the Advancement of Women organized an informal working meeting during the 44th Session of the General Assembly in which Member States have expressed what kind of follow-up actions they wish the extended session on the status of women will produce. Based on the fruitful outcome of this informal working meeting and a synthesis of contributions made by various NGOs, the Division for the Advancement of Women has prepared a draft recommendation (United Nations Document ECN/6/1990/6) to be discussed by the next extended session of the Commission.

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Sellami-Meslem raised some "pending questions":

1. The World Conference on Women. The 44th General Assembly has proposed that the Commission of the Status of Women shall decide the exact time and venue.

2. The Year of the Family. The Commission of the Status of Women recommends to be consulted in the preparations for the planned "Year of the Family" in order to ensure that women's rights and interests are taken into account.

3. The Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention was adopted by the 44th General Assembly. Ms. Sellami-Meslem stressed the indispensable role women play in the implementation of this Convention.

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